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MARY LAMPERT, chairwoman of Duxbury's Nuclear Advisory Committee

Pill stockpile for nuclear emergency urged in town

By Karen Hayes
GLOBE CORRESPONDENT

DUXBURY — To activist Mary Lampert, it's a "no brainer." Stockpile potassium iodide pills in schools, municipal offices, shelters, and reception centers to provide thyroid protection against radioactive releases in the event of a nuclear accident.

For the last decade, Lampert, who chairs Duxbury's Nuclear Advisory Committee and is director of Massachusetts Citizens for Safe Energy, has fought unsuccessfully to get federal and state agencies to do just that.

Now, impatient with big government, she is fighting on home turf.

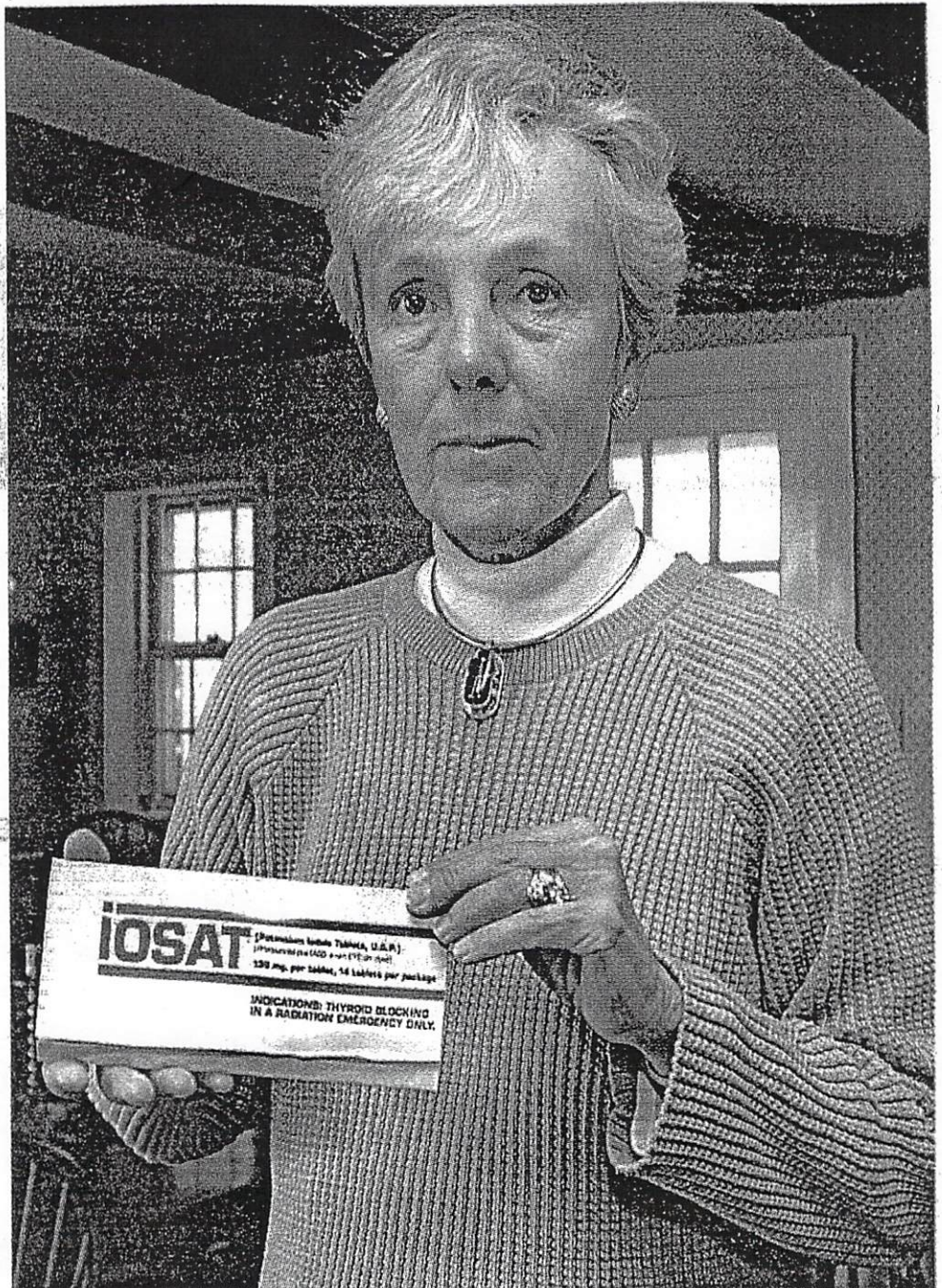
"Should the town wait when my house, for example, is six miles from the power plant?" Lampert said.

She has drawn the support of the Duxbury Board of Health and the Civil Defense director, who have joined the Nuclear Advisory Committee in asking next month's annual Town Meeting to stockpile potassium iodide, or KI, for public use.

Radioactive iodine, which traveled hundreds of miles on prevailing winds in the aftermath of the 1986 Chernobyl nuclear plant accident in the Ukraine, can cause thyroid cancer, birth disorders, and mental retardation, particularly in children, they say. Potassium iodide blocks radioiodine from accumulating in the thyroid gland.

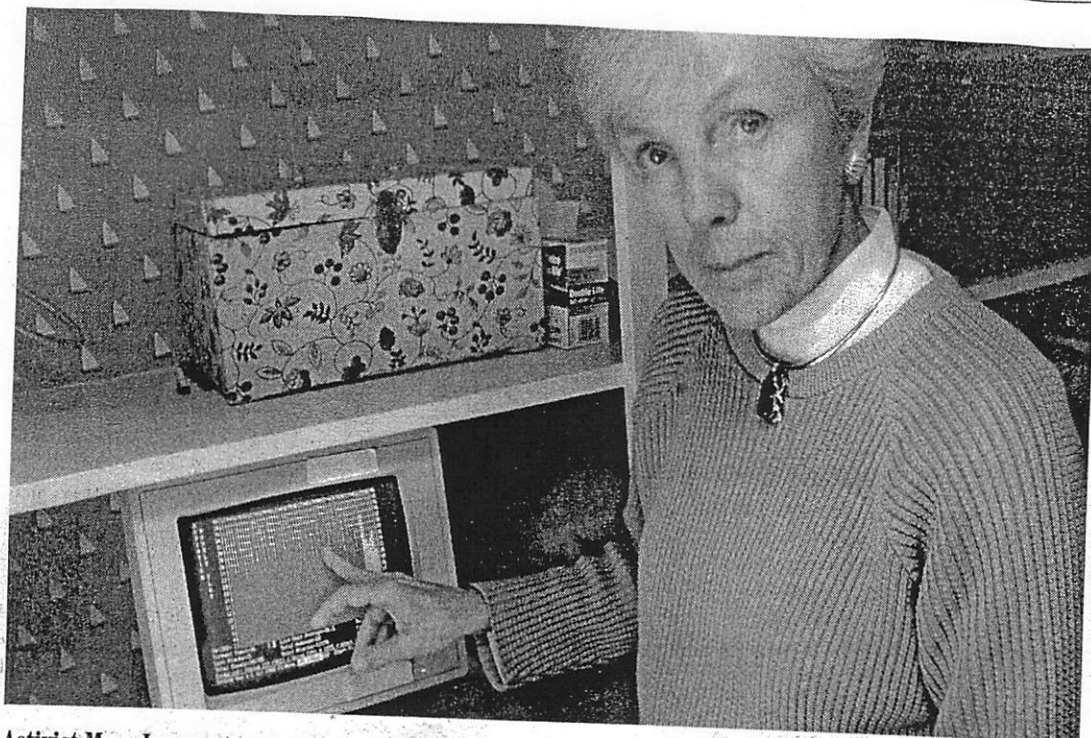
Duxbury, along with Plymouth, Kingston, and parts of Carver and Marshfield, falls within the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency's emergency planning zone, an area that includes about 10 miles around the Pilgrim Nuclear Power

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GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / BARRY CHIN

Mary Lampert holding potassium iodide pills at her home in Duxbury. She wants the town to have stockpiles of the pills, which can provide thyroid protection from radiation.



GLOBE STAFF PHOTO / BARRY CH

Activist Mary Lampert uses a computer in her home to track releases from the Plymouth nuclear plant.

Duxbury activist seeks stockpile of pills for nuclear emergency

■ POTASSIUM IODIDE PILLS

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Station in Plymouth.

The article on the March 11 annual Town Meeting warrant asks the town to raise, appropriate, or transfer from available funds, including a fund provided annually from Entergy Nuclear, Pilgrim's owner, a sum of money to obtain and stockpile the pills in schools, emergency shelters, and a municipal building for general distribution.

"I think the chance of taking this is very remote," said William Harri- man, Duxbury's Civil Defense direc- tor and fire chief since 1996. "But I also think, why would you not do it if there is any chance?"

Lampert agreed. "We have fire extinguishers in our homes, life jack- ets in our boats, and ipecac in our medicine cabinets for our children. In a similar vein, we should have KI. We hope we never need it; but not to have it would be foolish," Lambert wrote in literature supporting the town meeting article.

Proponents say the FDA-ap- proved drug is safe, effective if taken before or soon after exposure, has a

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MARY LAMPERT, Duxbury activist

long shelf life and is inexpensive. They point to support from interna- tional experts in the medical and sci- entific community, including the World Health Organization, the American Thyroid Association and the Union of Concerned Scientists, and, at the state level, to the Mas- sachusetts Coalition to Stockpile KI, which includes the Greater Boston Physicians for Social Responsibility, MassPirg, and the Women's Com- munity Cancer Project.

Potassium iodide already is

stockpiled for the public in other states, including Alabama, Tennes- see, and Arizona, and in many na- tions around the world, such as France, Japan, and Armenia, Lam- pert said.

But backers such as Lambert say they have faced persistent opposi- tion from the nuclear industry and some federal and state regulators because those agencies fear eroding public confidence in nuclear technol- ogy.

"It is not antinuclear; it is not pronuclear," Lampert said. "It is just a common sense public safety is- sue."

As demonstrated in Chernobyl and at the Three Mile Island plant in Harrisburg, Penn., in 1979, nuclear accidents happen, she and others say. After Chernobyl, Poland dis- tributed 18 million doses of KI. order and over the Internet, but it is not in drugstores.

"In Duxbury schools, there are 3,600 students approximately," Lam- pert said. "At a dime apiece for five years we are talking under \$400."

Currently in Massachusetts, po- tassium iodide is stockpiled only for emergency workers and institution-

alized populations. But a decision whether to change that policy is expected soon.

Robert Hallisey, Radiation Con- trol Program director for the sta- Department of Public Health, said last week that the Governor's Ad- visory Council on Radiation Protec- tion, which has studied the KI issue over the last six months at the be- hest of Duxbury activists, was poised to make a recommendation to Publ- ic Health Commissioner Howard Kc as early as this week.

If Koh decides to change or aug-

ment the current policy of providing only for emergency workers and those in institutions, the state Public Health Department then would im- plement it, Hallisey said. That could happen even before a town forum on the potassium iodide article March 7 or the start of the Duxbury Town Meeting March 11, he said.

But Hallisey would not give his opinion on the question of stockpil- ing potassium iodide.

"It becomes more inflammatory to the whole process," he said. "I prefer not to make comments about it while it is before the [radiation protection advisory] council."

He said the state Health Depart- ment stand for years has been not to require KI distribution for the gen- eral public "... because the belief was that evacuation and shelter were the correct protective action."

Lampert said KI stockpiling should supplement evacuation and shelter. Even if residents have KI in their homes, for example, it would not help their children if they are in school or at the beach during an acci- dent, she said.

Carl Crawford, manager of nu- clear communications for Entergy Nuclear, based in Jackson, Miss., said his company's official stance on stockpiling potassium iodide is to rely on the health authorities.

"We do not stockpile at plants even for our employees because we feel the safety systems we have are sufficient," he said. "Safety is our number one goal, and we agree with most of the health authorities we've talked to and literature in the indus- try that the best protection is evacu- ation. We don't try to be experts in public health. That's the job of those officials."

David Tarantino, a spokesman for the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Sta- tion, sold by Boston Edison to En- tergy Nuclear last summer, agreed

David Tarantino, a spokesman for the Pilgrim Nuclear Power Station, sold by Boston Edison to Energy Nuclear last summer, agreed it is up to state health and emergency management agencies to set and implement stockpiling policy. Pilgrim officials are awaiting the state's recommendations, he said.

"We would try to follow whatever the state felt was the best policy in the matter of public health," said Tarantino, a former Plymouth selectman.

Asked about the upcoming Town Meeting article, he said, "There is really only one person that is pushing this and that is Mrs. Lampert. She is the nuclear advisory committee in Duxbury."

The Nuclear Matters Committee in Plymouth discussed the potassium iodide issue several months ago, said member Maura Reynolds, but did not take a formal vote on the matter. Speaking for herself and not for the committee as a whole, Reynolds said she was not convinced.

"We are talking hundreds of thousands of children," Reynolds said. "The logistics seem enormous. ... It just seemed that it wouldn't be that useful."

Diane Brown-Couture, nuclear safety director for the Massachusetts Emergency Management Agency, called potassium iodide "a hot issue right now."

"It's a complicated issue, and I'm not going to second-guess whether it should or shouldn't be stockpiled because at the state level it's a public health call."

Pending any state action, Lampert will continue to act locally. If the upcoming article fails, she said, she will call a special Town Meeting to accept her monetary gift to pay for stockpiling potassium iodide.

"I spend more going to Washington to testify before FEMA," she said. "If I spend thousands of dollars, who cares? ... Some people rock AIDS babies. This is what I do."

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